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ABSTRACT

A brief history of the toy library movement is offered. Programs for both handicapped and nonhandicapped children in 15 countries are described and the effectiveness of such programs is considered. Two types of toy library programs are defined--the Scandinavian model, or lekotek (designed exclusively for handicapped children and their families and staffed by professionally trained personnel who combine toy lending with assessment of children's needs and parental guidance) and the Anglo-Saxon version (which is more loosely organized and relies more on charities and volunteer services). Lekotek and toy library programs are described for: Sweden, Norway, Finland, Iceland, Great Britain, Canada, the United States, Australia, New Zealand, France, Switzerland, Italy, Mauritius, Brazil, and Zimbabwe. The following are among the conclusions: lekoteks tend to have a high quality of diagnostic and remedial service, but often lack the enthusiasm and idealism of volunteers and the active involvement of parents; and the Anglo-Saxon toy libraries have the freedom and flexibility to serve all children and to address a greater variety of personal and group needs, however, volunteers often lack the skills needed to be of optimum assistance to their clients. (SW)

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Toy Libraries for the Handicapped:

An International Survey

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Abstract

Over the past two decades hundreds of toy libraries for both handicapped and non-handicapped children have come into being in many countries. They are generally of two types. The Scandinavian model or lekotek is a part of the formal educational and psychological services system, is staffed with professional personnel, and receives on-going financial support. The Anglo-Saxon version is more loosely defined and reflects more local resources, needs, and initiatives. The programs are frequently run by volunteers, and the funding may be unreliable. The article has brief descriptions of toy libraries programs in 15 countries. With the positive publicity the toy libraries have received and the obvious need for such services, there is little doubt that they shall grow in numbers and importance in the years ahead.

Toy Libraries for the Handicapped:

An International Survey

One of the most interesting phenomena in both regular and special education during the past two decades has been the growth of the toy library movement. In a few years hundreds of these preschool centers for both normal and handicapped children have sprung up in many countries, and the momentum is continuing. This article provides a brief history of the toy library movement, short descriptions of the forms it has taken in individual countries, sketches of some characteristic toy libraries, an evaluation of the usefulness and effectiveness of toy libraries, and some projections for the future.

History

The earliest recorded toy library was apparently established in Los Angeles in 1935 as a community supported service to the children of the city. During the ensuing thirty years there have been a few scattered reports of similar innovations in different countries, including some in the United States in connection with the Head Start programs in the 1960's. However, the current interest in toy libraries can be traced to the creative and

persistent efforts of two talented and dedicated women in two different countries: Karen Stensland Junker in Sweden and Jill Norris in England. Both are parents of handicapped children. Because of the different social conditions and traditions of service delivery in the two countries the development of the toy libraries systems in the two countries has taken different forms and directions. One may actually describe them as two different models: the Scandinavian and the Anglo-Saxon.

Stensland Junker is the mother of two severely handicapped children, a mentally retarded boy and an autistic girl. The latter is described in the book The Child in the Glass Ball (Stensland Junker, 1964). The author is also a professor of audiology and the inventor of an infant screening test for communicative disorders which is widely used in Sweden and also in other countries (Stensland Junker, 1978). Unhappy with the inadequate programming for young handicapped children and the lack of assistance to parents, she and another mother of a disabled child, Evy Blid (1971), started in 1963 in Stockholm a preschool center which she called a "lekotek." This word is an invented term that has a good sound in the Scandinavian languages. "Lek" means both "play" and "toy" and "otek" is the last part of the word "bibliotek" which means "library." Some countries have adapted and adopted the Swedish expression. Thus

it is "ludotheque" in French, "Ludothek" in German and "ludoteka" in Italian. "Ludo" is the Latin word for "toy." Some centers in English speaking countries simply use the Swedish term if they emulate that model.

From the beginning the lekotek was primarily intended as a professional service to handicapped children and their parents. This objective was later clearly stated in a definition formulated by the Swedish Lekotek Association:

The lekotek provides educational counseling and support for families with pre-school children who have physical, psychological or social handicaps.

It promotes knowledge, gives advice and support as regards the child's development and is a link in the habilitation of handicapped children.

The lekotek provides individual educational counseling of activity and remedial programs which includes the loan of toys free of charge.

The lekotek staff cooperate with others working in the field of child rehabilitation and act in a consultative capacity in relation to other authorities within child care.

Another function of lekoteks is to keep informed in the educational and qualitative development of play-material.

The lekotek in Stockholm was an immediate success, and other centers were soon established throughout Sweden and in the other Scandinavian countries. It also gave the impetus to the development of similar services for young handicapped children in other parts of the world. A common characteristic of the Scandinavian model is the emphasis on professionalism. The lekotek staff is expected or required to have training in child development or special education. Although some centers get started through the initiative of individuals or private organizations, the supervision and funding is eventually taken over by public education agencies.

A second type of toy library was started in England in 1967 by Jill Norris, in cooperation with other parents of handicapped children. They got together to exchange toys for their children, but they soon found that their meetings had other benefits as well. The experience of the group was taken up by the media, and the toy libraries movement was born.

In the beginning the toy libraries were designed for handicapped children and their parents, but they gradually broadened their scope to include non-handicapped children, older handicapped people, the families of prisoners, and children with social and economic needs. Unlike their Swedish counterparts, the British toy libraries receive

less governmental support and cooperation, and they rely more on charities and volunteer services. Often they function simply as toy lending facilities staffed by non-paid lay people.

Like the Swedish lekoteks, the British toy libraries caught the attention of concerned parents and professionals in other countries. Throughout the 1970's many such libraries were started, particularly in the English-speaking parts of the world.

From the very beginning, cooperation and information exchange among operators of those new learning centers were strong both nationally and internationally. Before long a number of national lekotek and toy library associations came into existence, often with their own newsletters and bulletins. The first international conference convened in London in 1978. It had 180 participants from 21 nations. A second conference was held in Stockholm in 1981 with people from 28 countries in attendance. A third conference is taking place in Brussels in 1984. The international network is maintained by the Toy Libraries Association in London, which in 1981 began the publication of an international newsletter. The association also has a list of national link persons.

National Programs

This section consists of brief descriptions of the lekotek and toy library programs in 15 countries. They represent both the

countries in which preschool services are most advanced and some in which they are in different stages of development. The information about them has mostly been drawn from personal correspondence with link persons and from newsletters and other publications they have provided.

Sweden

In Sweden there were in 1981 about 65 lekoteks with a total enrollment of about 4,000 children. This is about one percent of the preschool population. The average lekotek has three staff members and serves about 60 children. Most of the centers are financed by the county or the township. Some receive their support from the national association for the mentally retarded, Red Cross, and the local school system. The first lekotek started by Stensland Junker and Blid was initially funded by the Swedish Scouting Association but has subsequently been placed under the direction of the Stockholm municipality.

The major handicaps encountered, listed in order of frequency, are: developmental disorders (mental retardation), physical handicaps, late psychomotor development, visual disorders, understimulation, hearing problems, behavior disorders, allergies, speech difficulties, perceptual disorders, autism, psychosis, minimal brain disorders, and mutism.

The majority of the staff have their professional training in preschool education. Many have taken graduate degrees in special education, advanced work in the behavioral sciences and/or in-service workshops by lekotek consultants.

Norway

The first lekoteks in Norway were started on the initiative of private organizations with financial support from the Department of Health and Social Welfare. The Department issued regulations for approval and guidelines for operating the centers. Estimated cost for initial purchase of toys was about \$7,000 and for yearly replacement and additions about \$2,000 to \$3,000.

In 1976, a new law gave the responsibility for the education of all preschool children to the Department of Education. This included the lekoteks which were placed under the auspices of the psychological and pedagogical services division of each school system. The lekotek leaders are now expected to be trained preschool teachers with additional course work in special education. According to the most recent information, there are now 136 lekoteks in operation.

Finland

Finland has a highly developed child care system for preschool children. Many day nurseries and other forms of supervised pro-

grams are conducted by the municipalities. The toy library movement found a ready response in the official Finnish philosophy of child care. Thus about 250 toy centers have already been established, usually financed by the municipalities and staffed with competent personnel. Several projects and experiments to enhance the effectiveness of the toy libraries are in progress at the University of Jyväskylä. One activity involves adaptations in the training of preschool teachers. The toy libraries are mainly designed for normal children, but as the staff are developing more skills they are gradually able to serve the needs of handicapped youngsters.

Among the Swedish-speaking minority, the Swedish lekotek model has been predominant. Lekoteks for handicapped children and their parents under the sponsorship of health organizations have sprung up in several cities.

Iceland

The tiny country of Iceland has three lekoteks. The one in Reykjavik is run in connection with The Developmental Center, a governmental institution providing services for disabled children from the whole country. Eventually, there will be eight developmental centers in the different parts of Iceland which will offer

medical, social, psychological, and educational services for the handicapped people in the region. A lekotek will be attached to each of the centers. The staff at the Icelandic lekoteks are preschool teachers or developmental therapists.

Great Britain

With its broad and comprehensive objectives and its relevance to the needs of children the British toy library movement has had a rapid growth. By 1982 there were about 800 toy libraries throughout the country. They differ greatly both in their specific purposes, the populations they serve, and the kinds of programs they offer.

As an example, in 1981 there were 43 toy libraries established in mental handicapped hospitals and an equal number were in the planning stage. One of them, the Manor Hospital, has a program supervised by two play leaders. Some residents come to the library to use the equipment under the guidance of ward nurses, who in turn receive advice from the play leaders. For the more severely and multiple handicapped the play sessions are held on the wards. An ample supply of home-made toys is provided by a local over-sixties club, a neighboring school, and the residents themselves (Lear, 1981).

Many of the toy libraries in the London metropolitan area address themselves to the children disenfranchised by the social and economic convulsions that have shaken Europe in recent decades. Barton (1981) has described the setting in graphic terms:

The problems are common to many European families: the break-up of family life, bad and inadequate housing, unemployment, ethnic minority groups cut off from their culture and family ties, single parents without proper day care for their children while they are out at work. . . The parents, deprived themselves, often do not know how to play with their small children. (p. 3)

For such a population, reaching the parents is of utmost importance. The staff therefore attempt to make the centers as inviting as possible with the opportunities for the parents to meet other parents and to talk about their needs and problems in an accepting atmosphere. Burdett Toy Library is such a place. It is situated in a very poor part of London with a large Asian immigrant population. Over 15 nationalities are represented among the numbers. The library makes a special feature of discussing play and toys in different cultures and of recognizing the needs

of immigrant children. Since Asian women often do not go out unaccompanied, a home visiting scheme has been instituted.

In Brighton, the Whitehawk Toy Library is focusing attention on latchkey children, youngsters without supervision because their parents work. The center is open after school and on holidays and offers such attractions as children's theater, puppetry and visits to adventure playgrounds and other places of interest. Senior citizens contribute greatly to the success of the project (Lee, 1980).

In 1972 the Toy Library Association (TLA) was founded as a registered charity with an advisory board of experts in child care. As a parent body, the TLA offers advice and support in setting up and running toy libraries. It tests and approves new toys in cooperation with toy manufacturers, and the findings are regularly published in its journal ARK and in an annual reference book The Good Toy Guide. The association also carries on surveys and researches about the effect of toy libraries services on children with special needs. One valuable project has been the publication of a series of 11 pamphlets dealing with toys for disabled children (Thompson, 1977).

In 1981 the TLA merged with a volunteer group called ACTIVE which is concerned with the play and communication needs of severely

and profoundly handicapped children and adults. A joint objective is the design and production of learning aids that are not commercially available. The TLA conducts many workshops about different facets of the toy library operations, sometimes in cooperation with other organizations.

Canada

In Canada it seems that toys have long been lent in some public libraries as part of their pre-reader services. In 1975 The Canadian Association of Toy Libraries was founded in Toronto, to a large extent through the initiative of Joanna von Levetzow who had observed the growth of the movement in England. One of the aims of the organization is "To foster the understanding of the play needs of young children; including those with special needs (the disadvantaged and the handicapped) and give guidance on the selection of toys and play material for toy libraries."

The CATL serves as a clearinghouse for information and communication among its members. It has an extensive collection of reference materials, and it issues a regular newsletter. One of its several publications is called Toys Help, A Guide to Choosing Toys for Handicapped Children. It was produced with a grant from the Hospital for Sick Children Foundation in Toronto. There are

now about 120 toy libraries in Canada, and the number is rapidly increasing.

The Newsletter contains general information and announcements from the association, reports about specific toy libraries, book and film reviews, descriptions and evaluations of new toys by a toy advisory council, and a design bank column for useful toys that have been developed by CATL members. Some of the contributions to the journal come from the United States where there is so far no similar organ.

The Canadian toy libraries take many forms depending on local needs, resources, and initiative. An imaginative project has been developed jointly by the Ottawa Board of Education and the Canadian Mental Health Association under a grant from the Department of National Health and Welfare ("Helping Families," 1983). The overall aim of the project is to assist families in raising healthy children by providing a meeting place for parents and young children in a congenial and comfortable atmosphere. The cooperative Toy Library Play Groups are located in modified classrooms in two elementary schools. A mental health worker is responsible for the program, but the running of the library is done chiefly by parent members. It has been observed that children who

have attended the toy library later adapt readily to regular school, and the parents relate more confidently to school authorities.

United States

In the United States the toy library movement is still in its beginning. In a survey, Ross (1982) has been able to gather information about 97 centers in 26 states. With the exception of the Los Angeles County Toy Loan Library which was established in 1935 and which is still in operation with 40 branches throughout the county, most of the others are recent in origin. A majority of them started in 1977 or later.

Twenty of the toy libraries in the survey mentioned that they served handicapped, disadvantaged, and special needs children. In St. Paul, Minnesota, Toys 'n Things Training and Resource Center has since 1983 operated a large resource program which includes a lending library of early childhood toys and equipment, audiovisual materials, books, and journals. It also provides workshops for child care workers, nursery school teachers, and parents. The center has published a number of training guides, resource books, film strips, and other informative materials, including a directory of toy lending libraries (Ross, 1982). In 1982 the center was

merged with several other agencies into a corporation called Resources for Child Caring.

In Youngstown, Ohio, the Easter Seal Society runs a "Toys for Love" which loans toys, books, and other developmental materials to schools, group homes, developmental centers, child abuse shelters and directly to exceptional children and their parents.

Sacramento, California, has a "Daisy Toy Lending Library" sponsored by the Council for Delayed Preschoolers. About 350 individuals use the resources. In addition, the library delivers toys to 40 classrooms each month.

In 1982, United Cerebral Palsy of Westchester, New York, inaugurated a unique new service, the Adriel and Evelyn Harris Toy Library for Handicapped Children. The center was developed by a rehabilitative engineer who had made electro-mechanical adaptations so that children with even minimal movement of the hand, arm, or head can make a toy perform. The most comprehensive program is provided by the Special Education Division of the Department of Education in Nebraska. In cooperation with the Nebraska Regional Library System it has established a "Toy Brary" with 15 branches throughout the state. This outreach program is especially designed to help children with disabilities and their parents.

A similar development is occurring in Illinois where since 1980 a Learning Games Library project, jointly sponsored by the Illinois Council for Exceptional Children and the Children's Section of the Illinois Library Association, has been in operation (Domroese, 1983). Its main purpose is to establish in local libraries collections of developmental learning games for pre-school and primary age children with special learning problems. So far a pilot program has been initiated in Oak Park. A bill to authorize the state board of education to contract to establish play libraries for children with special needs has been brought before the legislature.

In Illinois there is also a lekotek based on the Scandinavian model. The founder, Sarah deVincentis, studied lekoteks in Sweden and Norway and subsequently started one of her own in Evanston to serve the Chicago metropolitan area. The center is run as a private, non-profit enterprise and is staffed by professionals in special education and remediation (deVincentis, 1983). In 1981 the Lekotek was funded to make a film which was produced partly in Norway, partly in Evanston. The film, Hidden in Play: Lekotek, has won several film awards.

National toy library associations now exist in more than a

dozen countries. Under the leadership of deVincentis a number of concerned people met in 1982 to form the USA Toy Library Association. Its objectives are to educate the public on the value of play, to promote the creation of toy libraries, and to be a clearinghouse of information for parents and professionals.

Australia

Information about the toy libraries in Australia is more complete than about any other country. The reason for this is that the Office of Child Care, Department of Social Security, commissioned an educational research center to conduct a survey. The results were published in 1981 in a book entitled Toy Libraries in Australia: A Report with Special Attention to Their Role in Services for Young Handicapped Children and Their Families.

Australian toy libraries show great diversity both in structure and function. Most of them have been heavily influenced by the English model, but the Swedish lekotek concept has also had an impact. The survey covers 33 toy libraries, which is about two-thirds of the estimated toy libraries in the country that were created primarily for handicapped children. Altogether about 7,000 children are served directly at these centers, and another 15,000 are reached indirectly through group memberships. The libraries

vary considerably in the number of clients they accommodate. Almost half of them have less than a hundred children whereas the two largest have more than 6,000 each.

Organizationally, the toy libraries fall into three major categories. The most prevalent type is community-based and open to all children with special needs. A second format is the resource unit which is generally restricted to children being served by an agency or institution. A third type of toy library is attached to a college or university that provides the services as a part of its teacher preparation.

The libraries have joined together in a national organization which publishes a journal, The Journal of the Australian Association of Toy Libraries for the Handicapped.

The first Australian toy library was started in 1971 in Melbourne. Noah's Ark Toy Library for Handicapped Children has grown into a comprehensive and diversified resource facility with both educational and therapeutic components. It has several branches as well as mobile services. The clientele comprises 2,000 individual members and about 130 groups with an average of 15 children each. The library also features play, music and hobby groups, holiday camps, and pre- and in-service training for professionals (Forell & Glue, 1979).

New Zealand

New Zealand has several toy libraries united in the Toy Library Federation of New Zealand. The Auckland Toy Library for Children with Special Needs started its operation in 1978 to serve children who are physically disabled, blind, deaf, slow learners, or environmentally deprived. It is directed by an occupational therapist employed by the Crippled Children Society and has an enrollment of over 400. The borrowing principle is to complement therapeutic and educational programs currently in progress.

Children are enrolled individually or in groups. The parents receive specific instructions on how to use the toys. About 35 children participate in play groups with two preschool workers and five therapists. The program is tailored to meet each child's individual needs and includes movement, finger painting, music, sensory stimulation, and socialization. To serve families that cannot come to the center a van service has been instituted. It visits on a regular basis twelve locations within the metropolitan area.

France

The first French toy library or "ludotheque" was opened in Dijon in 1968. Others have quickly followed. There are now more than 250 ludotheques united in a national organization, I'Association

des Ludoteques de France (A.L.F.). Many of the centers are attached to the public libraries as an extension of their function. The ludoteques were initially perceived by many toy manufacturers as a threat to their interests, but their attitudes have changed. They now work with the toy libraries in different ways. In Lyon the ludoteque employs several educational specialists who try out new toys to assess their appropriateness in meeting the needs of children. More than 80 percent of the toy manufacturers in France cooperate in this enterprise.

Some toy libraries have been established to serve underprivileged children in urban areas; others are connected with hospitals. A few ludoteques have been created especially for handicapped children. Best known is the Armoire à Jouets or "Toy Armory" in Paris. It was started in 1977 by two mothers of handicapped children. One was Rosalind Hargreaves from England, the mother of a child with Down's Syndrome. The other was a Swedish lady, Martha Sundberg, the wife of the late director of the special education section for UNESCO. They were the parents of a deaf girl. The two mothers combined their experiences with preschool centers in their respective home countries. With support from the Association of Parents of Mentally Retarded

Children they established a toy center primarily for children with developmental disabilities. The Amoire à Jouets has received considerable and positive press coverage and is serving as a model for similar innovations in other places.

Switzerland

In Switzerland, the interest in toy libraries has been in part traced to two seminars sponsored by UNESCO during the mid-70's to combat socio-cultural deprivation among young children. There are now over 60 toy libraries in operation in addition to about 40 "toy corners" in public libraries. These centers are supported by a variety of charitable organizations, industrial and commercial concerns, public funds, and membership fees. In 1980, the Swiss Ludotheque Association was established under the enthusiastic leadership of Anne Libbrecht, who herself is the founder and director of a toy library and the author of a book on the subject.

The association has a comprehensive information service. It produces a newsletter and has available on loan a number of films, slide series, and talks on cassettes. It has conducted several short courses and plans to establish a diploma for future toy librarians. In the Swiss programs there are apparently no special provisions for handicapped children.

Italy

In Italy, the first toy library or "Ludoteca" was established in Florence in 1977 as a joint venture by the city council and the electricity workers union. There are currently 17 toy libraries in operation, and many more are in the planning stage. A national seminar has been held to train toy library workers, and the participating libraries publish a monthly journal to share experiences and information.

In Italy the toy libraries have taken on a special character. They seem to have arisen out of a need among the citizens to improve the quality of life in their communities, particularly for their children. Civic and cultural organizations and the parents are actively involved, and the activities often have a social and cultural dimension such as having birthday parties and decorating floats at carnival times. The city of Como has been especially creative in making its toy libraries accessible to handicapped children and has even established a branch on the children's ward of a hospital.

Mauritius

With support from Save the Children in Denmark and the United Kingdom a toy library has been in operation in this young island

republic since 1979. The center offers diagnostic and remedial services for handicapped children, counsels parents, lends toys to preschools, provides training for teachers, and organizes workshops for making toys. A unique feature is a production unit for educational toys which trains young handicapped people in woodwork and handicrafts.

Brazil

In Sao Paulo a toy library was started in 1972 by the Association for Parents and Friends of the Exceptional. Because of the economic and social problems of the country, funding is a major problem. The association has met this challenge by creating its own play materials. It has a display of 200 toys made from waste objects. The staff has also prepared a manual about learning and teaching materials which was published by the Ministry of Education. The manual contains a list of learning objectives and a series of over 500 color photos of toys with directions on how to use them to meet the objectives. One chapter is devoted to the creative use of lids in reaching educational goals.

In 1981 a congress on educational resources was held with the director of the British Toy Library Association as an invited expert. The meeting has stirred much interest in the subject of toy libraries.

Zimbabwe

In Zimbabwe the first toy library was started in 1978 in Bulawayo. A second one was set up in Salisbury in 1980. After using space in the children's section of the main library for two years, it has been moved into its own building, erected with donated funds on the grounds of a school for the handicapped. Service organizations, such as the Lions and the Rotary, have been generous with money and assistance of all kinds. About 400 children are involved in the program. Future plans include a mobile library to serve the rural areas.

Summary and Reflections

Over the past two decades toy libraries for handicapped and non-handicapped children have sprung up in more than 30 countries. In some countries they have become incorporated as a formal part of the educational and social services system.

Toy libraries take two distinctly different forms. The Scandinavian model or lekotek is designed exclusively for disabled children and their parents. The lekotek is staffed with professionally trained personnel who combine the lending of toys with assessment of the children's needs and with parental guidance. The lekoteks are generally protected by legal and administrative

provisions and are guaranteed ongoing financial support.

The Anglo-Saxon model is more loosely defined. These toy libraries take many forms depending on local needs, resources, and initiatives. The toy libraries often include normal children and older individuals. The service is informal and often group oriented and may include developmental activities not related to toys. The programs are frequently run by volunteers and funding may be unreliable.

Both types of programs have their advantages and their drawbacks. The lekoteks tend to have a high quality of diagnostic and remedial service, but they lack some of the benefits that came with the enthusiasm and idealism of volunteers and the active involvement of parents. The toy libraries have the freedom and flexibility to serve all children and to address a greater variety of personal and group needs. On the other hand, volunteers often lack the skills needed to be of optimum assistance to clients, and the uncertainties and limitations of financial support may hamper the quality of the operation. Countries that start new programs sometimes draw upon the best of the two approaches.

The rapid growth of the toy library movement can be traced to several factors. First, there is an ever-increasing realization

of the importance of early intervention in child development both with regard to the prevention of disabilities and in the remediation of handicaps. Support comes from both theory and research as well as from clinical experience. Secondly, there is a renewed respect for the role of parents in children's motivations and learning. A third point is the financial savings that come from having parents as partners in early education and therapy. In the industrialized nations faced with continual financial crises governments are reluctant to pay for new educational and other services. Similarly, in the developing world where poverty is often endemic early childhood programs will in the foreseeable future be almost entirely dependent on private and parental initiative.

The need for young children to receive better care is great. Even in countries where services are the most highly developed only a limited percentage of the children and parents who could benefit from such assistance get it.

With the positive publicity the toy libraries have attracted during their short existence there is little doubt that they shall grow in numbers and importance in the years ahead.

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